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sermon preached at the ...

HISTORICAL AND REMINISCENT

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

BAPTIST CHURCH,

RED BANK, NEW JERSEY,

BY THE FIRST PASTOR

REV. T. S. GRIFFITHS,



August 5th, 1894.

(Published by request.)

GIFT OF THE AMERICAN BAPTIST
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Deuteronomy xxxiii, 29: "Happy art thou, O Israel: Who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help and who is the sword of thy excellency."

THERE was but one people Israel; a family separated unto the Lord from all other families of men; of whom the promised one—the Christ—was to come. Two eras in their history answer to the exultant forecast of this Scripture: One under the Judges xvii, 6: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."—A milennial period, characterized by righteousness, peace and brotherly kindness. The other, at the close of David's reign and the opening years of Solomon's, I Chron., xxix, 20: "And all the congregation blessed the Lord God of their fathers, and bowed down their heads and worshipped (acknowledged) the Lord and the King."

Amid this national gladness Solomon came to the throne. It is said of those days, that silver and gold were "as plenteous as stones." "And there came all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon." "And every man dwelt under his own vine and fig tree." Riches, wisdom, peace, content and the divine favor constituted a literal Utopia, than which no other is known in human history since sin's blight of earth.

Jubilees of growth and of the prosperity which God giveth stir in us the same gladness as that of the text. God is the same in his graciousness to his people in all the ages. Now, as in the olden time, this jubilee year is to you a memorial of the Lord your shield, in whom you have had shelter; your sword by whom you have won victories, and have come unto this day of gladness. The thought of the hour is: The Lord Christ, the King—the shield and sword of the past, of the present and of coming days.

THE DIVINE HAND WAS MANIFESTLY IN THE ORIGIN AND PRESERVATION OF THIS CHURCH.

Since there must needs be personal allusions, I beg your patience and kind consideration for such references.

Middletown, fifty years ago, was thoroughly Baptist. The three churches, Middletown, Holmdel and Keyport, were centers of power, and their pastors men worthy of their trust. Shrewsbury, however, was to us an unknown land. Abel Morgan had included Long Branch in his labors, and a goodly number of influential persons united with the Middletown church, who for nearly half a century later constituted a positive Baptist element there. After him, only occasional Baptist ministries were had there. These ceased ere long and those who had been of us passed away.

The Middletown shore of the Navesink river was lined with Baptist families, but on this side of the river only nine Baptists lived in Red Bank, and two east of here. The Episcopal and Presbyterian churches were in the village of Shrewsbury, also the "Friends' Meeting." A Methodist church was in Rumson; another below Long Branch; and a houseless interest of the Methodist family below Red Bank. Pastor Stout of Middletown preached here in the "Forum" once in each month; also Mr. Taylor of Shrewsbury, monthly. These were the only regular religious services in Red Bank up to November, 1843.

At the meeting of the Board of the New Jersey Baptist State Convention with the New Jersey Baptist Association in Jacobstown, September 12th, 1843, Pastors Stout of Middletown, Hires of Holmdel, and Wilson of Keyport, called attention to Red Bank and Shrewsbury as a mission field. Unbeknown to one another, each of them asked me to visit Red Bank and vicinity. Impressed with this concurrent request, I invited a mutual conference, when it was arranged for me to visit Red Bank.

It seemed to me that God was in this thing. For many months I had been looking for my place. I had traversed a large part of eastern Pennsylvania and middle and west Jersey; not for a church,—for I had from the first determined that I would not follow any one in the pastoral office, and would therefore settle in a new and unoccupied field and have only the one life-long settlement. I had also a choice of locality, and a decided preference like to that of John the Baptist—a place where there "was much water." As yet I had not seen the place to suit me. When, however, I came here, saw these hills and plain and people and river, I said to myself, "I have found it. Here I come and stay and die."

The concert of the pastors near by ; the locality itself, answering to all my predilections ; the field new and wide and virgin for Baptist planting ; the people so kindly ; seemed like voices from Heaven calling me to enter in and occupy. With such conditions, you will not be surprised to know, when, a year later, every inducement that could be presented to a young man with a career before him, was offered me to leave the field, the answer came instantly, "Never, so long as I can earn my bread by daily labor." Preaching for Mr. Stout in the morning, I preached here in the afternoon of September 24th, 1843, from Rev. iii, 20, and continuously each evening for two weeks.

In October, 1843, the Board of the State Convention appointed me their missionary in this region for six months. Returning to Red Bank, I began my ministry on the evening of November 17th, 1843, with a congregation of thirty-three persons.

Prior to my coming back our Methodist brethren had suddenly awakened to the great importance of this field. It is usually so. However long a place is left desolate, if Baptists enter it other names of the Christian family quickly discover the need of its people of *their* doctrinal ideas. There may be two reasons for this—first, the Baptists are good leaders ; second, they are safe to follow.

A Mr. Corbit had been sent here, and taking possession of the "Forum" (the only hall in town for public assemblies) morning and evening, shut others out. The trustees notified him to divide the use of the hall with us, whereupon, like Naaman, he "turned away in a rage." But unlike Naaman, he did not come back. This turned out to our advantage, since it left the house for our sole use until our church edifice was ready for us. Thus again, God made way for us and turned hindrance into helpfulness. A like instance occurred from the same source at another station, with the same result. Greed rarely fails to be suicidal.

The pastor's salary was about two hundred dollars, and he must needs keep a horse. When, later, he began housekeeping, his salary about paid his rent. And yet he not only did not lack any needful thing, but always had great abundance and avoided the plague of debt. Supplies for his horse came to the barn ; and for the home, an inflow for the larder and for the wardrobe and for the purse ; all without the asking and often ignorant himself from whence it came.

Large salaries were not given nor expected by pastors in New Jersey till later years. But the salary was not an index of income.

Really, the pastors then had larger revenues than now, and those who remained long in the state rarely failed to lay by a store for retired life. The longer settlements of former days were due largely to the bond of mutual interest and love which these tokens expressed. The *business* feature of pastoral settlements in these times is the most satisfactory explanation of their short and uncertain tenure. It will always be, that pastors who impress the people that their "living" is secondary to their "service," will have a place in their hearts and a share of their substance, which very practically verifies the Scripture, "The laborer is worthy of his reward."

Looking back on this fiftieth year from this mount of promise—your new and beautiful and spacious house—to the beginnings, when you were few in number, limited in means, hindered by the secret opposition of our denominational household from without, and by the uncongeniality of the soil to Baptist seed, we mark how God brought to pass at the right time, and in the most effective way, the needful conditions to permanency and growth. Since then, along these years, you have way-marks of the Lord, your shield and sword. This jubilee may well be to you a Pisgah, whence you can see a land of promise, touching the distant horizon of your hopes and prayers.

HINDRANCES AND HELPS.

Shortly after my coming here, objection to our work arose over the river. The missionary was warned against a church organization and advised to leave. Two Councils met before the church was recognized. The world is not bettered by cross purposes among the children of light. You will be happy if in your association with the Kingdom of Christ, you have been a "helper." Far otherwise will it be with you if you must be shoved out of the way, or if you drift, and are lodged by the tide on the shore, "a dead stick."

It is doubtful if the church would have been recognized when it was, but for one man, and he not a member of it—Mr. C. G. Allen. His wife was one of us, and "for her sake" we had the benefit of his great force of character, his wide acquaintance and influence in a large circle.

In August, 1844, the church was recognized. At the same time the pastor was ordained, and also two deacons, Joseph M. Smith and Sidney T. Smith, were set apart in their office by the "laying on of hands."

A house of worship was essential to the welfare of the church. The influence which had withstood our organization delayed the completion of the building a long time. The earnest purpose and planning of Mr. Allen, however, availed much for us. A very busy man, he oftentimes came to my house and said: "I have two or three hours to spare. Can we go out and do something for the church?" This tribute is due to him. God was on our side and turned his heart to us. Indeed there were no laggards among us. Of his people the pastor could speak as Paul of some of his time, "My helpers."

The church edifice was dedicated July 17th, 1849, Rev. H. V. Jones of Newark preaching the opening sermon. That house was your home for forty-five years. Many times has it been a Bethel, "the house of God, and the gate of Heaven." And now, having built for yourselves this vastly better place, with its choice appliances for the larger work to which the Master calls you, I pray that it may exceed the former in spiritual blessing as much as it is better than that in the requisites for efficient Christian service.

The largeness of the field, and the newness of Baptist teaching in it, involved no little diligence in the pastor. During the winter he had seven weekly appointments to preach, three being on the Lord's day. In the summer he had five meetings on the Sabbath, besides being superintendent of the Sunday-school and teaching a class. His busiest day was one in which he baptized early in the morning, superintended and taught in the Sunday-school, preached and administered the communion; rode four miles and preached at two o'clock; thence three miles, preaching again; after supper six miles to evening service; from there five miles home and married a couple. Prior to the completion of the meeting-house we had no facilities for special meetings in Red Bank. And soon after its dedication, I resigned to accept the pastorate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, removing there in January, 1850. We had, however, some tokens of the Divine favor.

A Methodist pastor in the town came to us and was baptized into our fellowship. An "elder" of the Shrewsbury Presbyterian church, one of the most active Christian men in this section, united with us by baptism. A deep tone of spirituality pervaded the church. God gave it "favor with all the people," the congregation crowding the house of worship.

An experience and witness to the truth is fitting here. In a new and unbaptistic field, the outspoken and full presentation of the distinctive faith of Baptists not only won the respect and con-

fidence of those without, but was an element of power, turning inquirers to the Bible to learn that we were not mere adherents to a creed, nor the champions of a sect, but Bible men and women. At Eatontown, in 1845, there was a wonderful work of grace. None knew the number of conversions. The last I baptized in January, 1850, were fruits of that meeting—from then and now pillars in the church there. At Long Branch a large congregation attended our meetings, manifesting an interest that gave promise of an early ripening and a large harvest.

Pastor W. D. Hires was a steadfast helper of the church; and one still living, Rev. Wm. V. Wilson—to him we could ever turn and lean upon. You owe a large debt of gratitude to these brethren for their sympathy and support in the time of need.

What we do for Christ is sure of fruitage, whether we live to see it or not. You have an instance of it in your surroundings on this jubilee anniversary—a large and united church; this spacious and beautiful house; this congregation filling it; your pastor, happy with you in the large rewards of his ministry, and yourselves busied in the activities of the Christian life at home and abroad. The Divine blessing upon your self-denials and devotion and service has made all this a blessed reality to you.

Four of the fourteen who plighted their faith to each other fifty years ago are present with you now, and rejoice with you in these testimonials of the Divine faithfulness. We, the remnant, must ere long pass on to join those who have gone before. It is a good report we can make to them of their charge left to you to care for.

As the prosperity of the past was, under the blessing of God, the reward of the single-minded Christian worth of those whose memorial was in the place of social prayer, the Sunday-school, and their readiness for special calls—men and women accounting themselves “called to make up deficiencies,” so must it still be.

Deacon Sidney T. Smith was a very modest man. But he was never known to be missing when time or money or hardship was in demand. In the torrid heat of summer, or the slush and snow and cold of winter, he walked miles to be in his place, superintendent of the mission Sunday-school.

Deacon Joseph M. Smith was a gentle spirit; a man of reading and of intelligence and of eminent devotion—a rock; always found where you would look for him, and when wanted within call.

Mrs. Allen, and Mrs. Bergen, and Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Wallace and the others were royal women; of the sort of whom Paul spake when he said, “And those women.” Wifehood makes the woman,

affording her the divinely instituted opportunity to evolve her influence and power for the highest good of the world. Husbandhood makes the man. It brings him into associations and relationships wherein he may realize the whole of himself and be a whole man for the best welfare of humanity. A family church, or a church of families, is the purest, richest fountain of good to earth which the Lord Jesus Christ left behind him. It is not alone his instrument of power to save and a channel of grace to mankind; but it is the womb of manhood, of home, of social virtue, of civil right, of intellectual and moral stamina. Let it be your aim to be such a church, known by the insignia of the cross—Jesus, the crucified; a temple of “precious stones,” wherein is “The Holy Place” and “The Mercy Seat,” where lost souls find pardon and peace by the blood which “cleanseth from all sin;” a treasure house of light, of help and of rest for the weary and heavy laden and wretched of our race.

Ere we go hence a closing reflection claims a place. What hitherto has made this church of worth must still be its strength. Neither numbers, wealth, social position, a stately house, nor gorgeous ceremonial worship, will secure your true welfare. The Divine Presence God your shield and sword, is an all-sufficient assurance of His abiding blessing. The glory of the first temple is gone, while that of the second abides forever; for He, the Nazarene, trod its courts!

Spurgeon’s great congregation was spoken of as consisting of “very plain people.” But there was a Presence there! Who of the wise would not rather be numbered with them, than with the royal and titled in Westminster? Intelligent building upon the Bible; teaching “the truth as the truth is in Jesus,” bravely, frankly and kindly, is a foundation of Christian character on which the fire has no power. This is the strength of Baptists and of Baptist churches. The things which I preached here more than fifty years ago, I still declare. These years of public ministry and of earnest study, and of varied experience amid the busy activities of life and in its retired circles, with the living and the dying, have confirmed my faith in the Bible, our creed; the Holy Spirit our teacher; Godliness our life; Jesus our Savior. Realized, these are Divine forces which will make us irresistible as a people and bring us to the Kingdom. May the congratulation of Moses in this text to Israel, ever be true of you as a people and a church.

Now, as at the first and probably last, I give you the watchword of the future, “Immanuel, God with us.”

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